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AUTHOR(S):

Okui, Haruka

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# Subject, Language and Body: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Educational Studies

HARUKA OKUI

Kokoro Research Center, Kyoto University

*Focusing on the body and language, this paper clarifies the concept of 'subject' from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty, in response to Saussure's initial insight, claimed that the subject is not given before speaking and that the meaning of the word arises not through concepts that pre-exist language but through language as a system of differences. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no meaning before a speaker begins to speak; a 'silence' exists before speech. Meaning emerges from a paradoxical relationship between existing and not-yet-expressed meaning, through the expressive field situated between speakers, signs, prior language use, and current speech, that is, through expression. Merleau-Ponty claimed that expression is not the intellectual activity of disembodied minds or consciousnesses but, rather, that the body is the medium of expression. Merleau-Ponty's insight reveals that the body itself has an expressive function that offers ways to comprehend the meaning of a word, which suggests that the subject himself or herself is born from the experience of speaking. This dynamic process of the subject emerging will be a trigger for activation if we are sensitive enough to keep it tacit in the educational setting.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I propose that the concept of phenomenology defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) is an effective method for considering the concept of the 'subject' in educational studies.

Following the 'linguistic turn', which claims that language is not only used to signify meaning but is also constitutive of the speaking subject, the meaning of words is now regarded as more than just a representation of what a subject intends to indicate (Austin, 1961). If some speeches or writings seem to be 'the activation of a system of meaning different from the apparent functioning of the signs', then the tacit message in a person's words becomes an alternative force acting on the balance of social power and, in particular, in relation to the force of educational systems (Standish, 1992, p. 97).

One way to become aware of the tacit messages in language is to understand its system of meaning. The approach presented by Merleau-Ponty is phenomenology. Following Husserl (Husserl, 1931), Merleau-Ponty argued that the body plays a significant role in the emergence of meaning in speech. His view suggests that the body is the 'subject' in the use of language (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Summarising Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological discussion through dialogue with other studies, I will consider the problem of the 'subject' in educational studies.

## LANGUAGE AND BODY

We generally presume that words have a pure or explicit meaning, as shown in a dictionary, and that we convey that explicit meaning when we use them. Merleau-Ponty did not deny this view of words

but rather regarded it as a secondary use of language. He observed that if we assume pure thought before expression, we cannot answer questions such as 'why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name' or why so many writers 'begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 177). Thus, he claimed that in its primary function, speech 'does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it' (p. 207).

Elaborating on this position, Merleau-Ponty proposed that speech should be regarded as 'gesture'. The expression of language is not an 'intention' belonging to a transparent subject but rather a 'gesture' similar to a bodily action.

The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its [meaning] ... I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger (pp. 183-184) .

If language, especially speech, can be regarded as a genuine gesture, then we may perceive the understanding of language as similar to the understanding of a gesture. In understanding the meaning of a gesture, we may see 'anger' in the 'surface of his pale or purple cheeks, his blood-shot eyes and wheezing voice' (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 84). Similarly, in understanding words, we comprehend the meaning the words have: 'I seize it [the meanings of words] in an undivided act which is as short as a cry' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 186).

In taking the position of 'language as gesture', the crucial focus is not on presentation but on the tone or style of words: words have meanings; they do not deliver them.

What I communicate with primarily is not 'representations' or thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the 'world' at which he directs his aim (p. 183).

Here, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes 'a certain style' from 'representations' and claims that our communications are performed not only by recognising representations of meaning but also by a dualistic attitude towards the speaking subject. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, 'as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit' (ibid.).

Merleau-Ponty disagreed with the view of language that reduces the meaning of words to a personal consciousness. The experience of the body is the pre-reflective realm out of which a reflective form of personal consciousness emerges. This phenomenological view of language defines the body as the subject in speech.

## BODY AS SUBJECT

The presumption that the body plays the role of the subject in language, encapsulating meaning or metamorphosing attitude, has inspired researchers who investigate the role of the body in a philosophical or practical context. I will now turn to a Japanese educator's reception of Merleau-Ponty's theory.

Toshiharu Takeuchi (1925-2009), an educator and actor, sought to take performance beyond modern forms of realism toward the ordinary use of the body on the stage. He held workshops and

gave lessons to teach verbal communication that encouraged students to evoke an action, as if words tapped one's shoulder or pushed against one's back: 'touch the other person with words' or 'deliver your voice to friends' (Takeuchi, 1988, p. 149). When he was a child, Takeuchi experienced hearing and speaking difficulties; thus, he had no choice but to watch the actions of others and 'touch' their gestures. He was sure it was the body that made the communication possible, which is neither a representational nor an intellectual process.

He later encountered Merleau-Ponty's idea that expression is not the intellectual activity of disembodied minds or consciousnesses but, rather, that the body is 'the medium of expression' (Adams, 2008, p. 153). The concept of the body as subject in expression encouraged Takeuchi, and he started constructing his training methods.

Takeuchi's work investigating the body as subject makes two important contributions to educational studies. First, it encourages us to reconsider approaches to the education of the body for learning language. Many studies focusing on education through the body have emphasised changing bodily practices and manner as a means of improving performance, but works of the body are, as Takeuchi said, not limited to just bodily practice, but are open to the foundations of the experience of the world before intellectual reflection. The potential of Takeuchi's work is that it illuminates the tacit works of the body, which are difficult to describe in terms of an intellectual process. The tacit interaction among bodies is a key point for discussing bodies in education; thus, our interest can shift away from simple physical training.

Takeuchi's second contribution is less positive, which shows us the difficulty of constructing an education program. Even though Takeuchi's work illuminates the tacit role of the body and releases it from a rigid educational system, active and vivid practice eventually becomes a convention through continuing that practice. I do not take issue with the new practice becoming routine, but I suggest that the new type of subject is conceptualised rigidly in the process. I worry that the clearly defined figure of the 'body as subject' that he placed as opposite the 'mind as subject' itself gives rise to a new forced standard. The release of the body from a rigid system results in a new and unavoidable norm, which reinforces existing school power structures.

In my view, the 'body' has both explicit and implicit meanings. The explicit meaning is the message the speaker consciously tries to deliver. Takeuchi's effort to describe implicit subjectivity is an important achievement, but the description itself invokes the explicit subject. To elaborate on the circular nature of explicitness and implicitness, I will return to Merleau-Ponty.

## **SUBJECT AND SILENCE**

On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's view of language seems to emphasize that the act of speech or writing reduces into bodily experience more than into the system or structure of language. On the other hand, however, in his middle period, Merleau-Ponty considered the emergence of meaning from the system of language itself. Merleau-Ponty states: 'the words needed to bring me significant intention to expression recommend themselves to me only by a certain style of speaking from which they arise and according to which they are organized' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 88). We can see in this a complex situation. 'Style' here, means 'morphological, syntactical, and lexical instruments, literary genres, types of narrative, modes of presenting events, etc.' (p. 90). Speech or writing can be formed through sustaining 'style', which constitutes the system of language as institution.

On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty says the meanings of words emerge from speech or writing as

‘gesture’, which then expresses the new meanings. On the other hand, he claims that these actions are sustained by institutional meaning. So how can we compromise over these different directions?

The key to solving this problem is in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a system. In response to Saussure’s (1857-1913) initial insight, Merleau-Ponty claims that the meaning of words emerges from the differences among words. If the relation of meaning to the spoken word ‘can no longer be a point for point correspondence that we always have clearly in mind’, then ‘the idea of complete expression is non-sensical’, and ‘all language is indirect or allusive’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 43). He approaches the idea of a language of ‘silence’.

In short, we must consider speech before it is spoken, the background of silence...Or to put the matter another way, we must uncover the threads of silence [*les fils de silence*] that speech is mixed together with (p. 46) .

Merleau-Ponty found that signs, morphemes, and words, taken one by one, signify nothing; they succeed in conveying signification only through assembly. If one tries to find the meaning of a single word, one will encounter the ‘silence’ of meaning because the meaning of words is formed from the whole of spoken language (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 103). ‘Silence’ is the occasion on which a new meaning comes into being. He says that the speaking subject does not express just for others, but also to know for himself what he intends. Furthermore, what a speaker intends is not known to him in advance, but rather is revealed through expression. Thus if a speaker succeeds in his expression, he discovers a new silence or lack of meaning: ‘it seems that language never says anything’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, p. 73).

This is his description of the system of language. According to Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of words is never explicit. He says, on the one hand, that speech or writing is the acquisition of a new style of expression and, on the other hand, that the new style is the discovery of a silence in which the words express nothing. He continues that an acquisition of a style can become a conventional usage of language, and that a silence of meaning can trigger the repetition of one’s expression. The cycle of speaking and institutionalization through communication reveals new meanings or uses for words, and these gradually become convention. In this cycle, we enter into what Merleau-Ponty describes as the reversibility of language and the dynamism of speech, which brings us to a new dialogue about the educational problems we face today.

## EDUCATION IN TACIT

Education studies tend to focus on explicit things about the works of the body because explicit things, e.g., performance, action, and achievement scores, can be quantified for purposes of management and assessment in the school system. As I described earlier, Takeuchi’s valuable training for actors could be easily included in the visible system if it were introduced into school classes today. We must, of course, recognize the importance of the visible system in the school for the purpose of constructing a universal and efficient educational environment. But at the same time, we must not be insensible to the invisible works of the body.

Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the meaning of words and the speaking subject should emerge from the living relationship between silence and speech, and that these are not certain, inspires us to think about the place of ‘body as subject’ in educational studies. We should not regard the tacit works of the body as explicit abilities, nor, furthermore, must we develop a curriculum for improving tacit

works. We have to investigate ways of becoming sensitive to tacit works while keeping them tacit. Education is necessarily not limited to improving only certain explicit abilities; it also includes keeping and becoming sensitive to tacit works.

Merleau-Ponty claimed that we should consider speech before it has been pronounced; we should be sensitive to the 'thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 87). To appreciate Takeuchi's considerable achievement in constructing methods for bodily communication today, we must consider his speech before it had been pronounced. This exploration of Merleau-Ponty's ideas does not aim to prove objective facts but seeks instead to explore the relationship between explicit and implicit meaning. It also explores the emergence and entrenchment of meaning, both visible and invisible.

[It] is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being... [P]hilosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xx).

The importance of the implicit use of language becomes apparent through those who are more sensitive to the changing meanings of words or actions. Tacit meaning should be a trigger for activation in educational contexts if we are aware of the nature of the tacit dynamism among bodies and subjects, as Takeuchi demonstrates on the stage.

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